

Insufficient Funding for Bilingual Education in Texas



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Recently, a couple of state leaders have claimed that Texas schools just need a better finance system, they do not need more money. Texas educators have been quick with their criticism, citing insufficient funds for teachers, buildings and special programs. Funding for teaching English language learners is in the mix of these issues.

Bilingual education teaches English to children and gives them a chance to use it. At the same time, they are taught core subjects like math and science. The facts show that bilingual education is a small investment that pays big dividends for the country in the form of a well-educated work force.

This article focuses on three areas: historical basis for Texas funding for its bilingual and English as a second language (ESL) programs, the evolution of funding formulae for the program, and current issues related to funding for students enrolled in the state's bilingual and ESL programs.

Historical Basis for Funding Bilingual Programs

The Intercultural Development Research Association was involved in the policy deliberations that led to the development of the state's bilingual education and ESL requirements. IDRA staff served as expert witnesses in the case that led to the state mandated-program and later as technical advisors to legislators who helped craft the current state policies.

We have tracked state funding discussions related to the program over the years including serving in Texas Education Agency accountable cost advisory committees that were periodically convened to assess and provide recommendations related to funding for the state's special population programs.

In *United States vs. Texas* (1981), plaintiffs challenged the state's practice of immersing students in all-English classes with no accommodation for the fact that some children were not proficient in English. As a result, the court ordered the state to provide specialized instruction for limited-English-proficient (LEP) children.

In an earlier decision in *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974), the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that concluded that failure to consider and adapt instruction for children who do not speak English violates federal equal protection requirements.

Prior to 1981, Texas provided local school districts the option to implement bilingual or ESL programs. Initially, no state funding was provided. Starting in 1975 with the adoption of HB 1126, the state of Texas allocated state funding to support program implementation. The funding mechanism used provided for a per pupil allocation of \$25 multiplied by the number of students who were actually participating in the local bilingual education or ESL program.

In 1981, after the adoption of the state programs required by SB 477, the allocation was increased to \$50 per LEP pupil identified and enrolled in a bilingual education program. This very basic approach to bilingual and ESL program funding was continued until 1984 and the adoption of HB 72.

That major overhaul of the Texas school finance system moved the state of Texas from a system primarily based on personnel unit funding, to one based on students enrolled. One part of this major reform also shifted the way Texas funded programs for what came to be called “special student populations,” or students identified as having special learning-related needs.

In this new funding system, the state moved from arbitrarily setting a per pupil funding amount to an approach that assigned a “weight” to different special needs pupils.

In HB 72, schools were provided additional funding in the state finance formula for LEP students who were enrolled in either a bilingual or ESL program. The weight assigned to bilingual education was then (and still is) 0.10. This weight is multiplied by the adjusted basic allotment for each district to come up with add-on funding that is provided. Like practically all other parts of the state funding system, the actual amount that is provided in state funding is adjusted to account for local district property wealth.

Why Bilingual Education and ESL Costs More

As noted earlier, most educators agree that providing specialized instruction for children identified as limited English proficient - or English language learners - costs more than educating non-LEP pupils. Personnel costs include specialized teachers who supplement instruction provided by a mainstream teacher and professional development to strengthen the skills of teachers working with LEP students. These require extra outlays in local schools.

Recent research indicates that almost one in three new teachers assigned to work in bilingual and ESL classes are not certified to teach in that area, continuing the need for specialized staff development for those personnel.

As in special education, assessment is used both to identify which students may require special instructional support and to decide when the students are ready to “exit” from the program. The state has designated testing instruments that may be used to identify LEP pupils for program placement and program exiting purposes.

Bilingual and ESL programs also require access to specialized instructional materials. Though the state incorporates some of these in the textbooks and supplementary materials as part of the textbook adoption process, local schools still need and use other “consumable” materials to deliver the specialized instruction needed for LEP students.

Due to the need to monitor program outcomes, bilingual programs also provide for focused evaluation of program implementation and program outcomes adding unique add-on costs for school systems.

Research on Bilingual Education and ESL Program Costs

The method used by the state of Texas to choose to assign a 0.10 weight to bilingual and ESL pupils was rather arbitrary. And the 10 percent add-on did not provide enough funding to operate these programs. We base this conclusion on cost of bilingual education studies conducted by IDRA in the late 1970s.

According to research IDRA conducted in Texas (1976) and replicated a few years later in Colorado (1978) and Utah (1979), the add-on costs for implementing bilingual education

programs ranged from between 0.25 to 0.41, with some of the variation attributable to the higher cost of recruiting bilingual or ESL teachers in more rural communities or regions.

The research method involved having a panel of experts identify the critical elements of an effective program. Among the features that experts identified were the following: specialized personnel costs; specialized instructional materials; specialized assessments; program evaluation expenses; and, in Utah, specifically additional personnel recruitment costs.

On the personnel costs side, we did not add on the cost for a whole new or additional teacher (since these students would have had a teacher provided under the regular program) but only included specialized costs associated with professional development to better prepare teachers to work with children enrolled in bilingual education classes.

Once the critical resource needs were identified, we researched what it actually cost to acquire and implement those features, on average, and then totaled those costs. To arrive at a “weight,” we divided the average per pupil expenditure for regular program pupils by the total add-on cost.

This 0.25 to 0.41 percent add-on weight for bilingual education is twice what the state of Texas has provided to its local districts to help offset the cost of providing this specialized type of instruction.

In a national study, Polly Carpenter Huffman and Marta Samulon, of the Rand Corporation, conducted case studies of delivery and cost of bilingual education in 1981. In their report, the authors noted that program costs varied by the type of instructional delivery model that was being used in a local school. They noted that “pull-out programs” that required the hiring of extra teachers to deliver supplemental instruction to LEP pupils were the most expensive. On the other hand, programs that used self-contained classrooms where one teacher provided bilingual instruction were less expensive.

In their analysis, costs for language assistance instruction ranged from \$100 to \$500 per pupil. In addition to those expenses, the researchers also noted that other costs should be taken into consideration in computing bilingual education add-on costs. These include program administration, staff development (which can add significant costs) and other functions such as student identification and assessment for program placement (cost items also included in IDRA’s cost analyses studies).

The total per pupil add-on cost estimate for the Rand study ranged from \$200 to \$700 (in 1981 dollars, an amount that would be significantly higher in 2004). For reasons that are not apparent, the researchers did not convert their data to a weighted pupil amount.

Contextual factors that were found to impact local costs included the instructional approach used to provide instruction to LEP pupils, the numbers of LEP students served, the primary languages involved, the extent and intensity of language instruction needed, and the availability of qualified personnel.

Since those early studies were conducted, very little research has been done in this area, and it is evident that new studies may be needed. Whatever happens in the interim however, it is clear from the review of the research that Texas has historically funded its bilingual education programs and that the level of the existing 10 percent weight should be increased.

Resources

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